

Whenever I ask my three-year-old son what the First Commandment is, he always says, “Honor your father and your mother.” I then say, “Cephas, that’s the Fourth Commandment.” Then I start saying the First Commandment so he can finish it: Do not have any other gods besides me. Now, why does Cephas keep thinking that the Fourth Commandment is the First Commandment? It should be obvious. He is most familiar with the Fourth Commandment. The highest and clearest authorities in his life are his father and his mother. We are God’s representatives to him, and there is perhaps never a time in your life when this is more apparent than when you are three years old. We recite all Ten Commandments at home, but it makes sense that the commandment to honor your father and your mother sticks out the most.

There are two tables of the law. The first tells you to love God with all your heart, and the second tells you to love your neighbor as yourself. The first neighbors God gives you are your father and the mother. The first thing God teaches you to do in this life is submit to your parents’ authority. Rely on your their care. Listen to them. Obey them. Commit your life to them. In this way, God is teaching us faith. He’s teaching us to rely on God who gave us our parents. Listen to him. Obey him. Commit your life to him. Fear, love, and trust in him.

Jesus says that a child of God listens to what God says. He, as the only begotten Son of God, came into the flesh to obey God’s law in the place of every sinner. This is why he says that he honors his Father. He didn’t come to get glory on his own terms. Instead, he committed himself to the Father. He says, “I’m not trying to get glory for myself. There’s one who wants me to have it, and he’s the judge.” The Father wants the Son to have glory. Jesus knows this. He knows that he and his Father are one. He shares the Father’s glory from eternity. As the Son, he has every right to this glory. It’s his. And yet, he doesn’t seek it. Instead, he is obedient to what the Father sent him to do. He remains focused on honoring his Father. He is willing to suffer crucifixion, death, and divine wrath, so much is he determined to do what his Father says. All the while, he is confident that his Father will glorify him. His Father will honor him. His Father has loved him from eternity. Before he called Abraham to faith, before our first parents fell into the sin, before he created the world – from eternity – the Father has loved the Son. Jesus is therefore unwavering in his mission to do what his Father gave him to do, to bear the sin of the world and win salvation and life for all.

Our Lord’s obedience puts the Fourth Commandment into perspective. Everything a father has he shares with his son. Even if his son can’t yet enjoy it or know how to use it, he still has what his father has. Fathers therefore should not provoke their children to anger. They should not be cruel to their children. They should discipline them with care and teach them with love. And yet, this is where our natural reason gets tripped up. Jesus Christ, the obedient Son of his eternal Father, walks the road to the cross. He bears the sin, the wrath, the whips, the insults, and unimaginable pain, all in obedience to his Father. Those who don’t know God look at this with horror. What kind of loving a father would send his son to suffer and die like this? They call it divine child abuse. But they are horrified and disgusted at the Father giving up his Son, not because they care so much about love and compassion. They don’t understand childcare better than God does. They can’t even begin to grasp the deep love the Father has for the Son. Instead, the offense they take at our Lord’s sacrifice comes down to their failure to recognize the darkness of their own sin.

We hear an example of this in the eighth chapter of John’s Gospel, in which Jesus argues with the Pharisees and other Jews at the temple. Our Gospel lesson picks up in the middle of this argument. It

has gotten very heated, and they are way beyond any kind of reasonable debate. They insult Jesus with a racial slur, calling him a Samaritan. They say he has a demon. And Jesus is already calling them children of the devil. This argument began to escalate after Jesus said that they would die in their sins because they didn't believe that he is God's Son. He then went on to explain that the Father sent him and that he would be lifted up on the cross. It was at this point that many of the people believed in him, but it was what Jesus said next that caused the manure to hit the fan.

Jesus said that if you abide in his Word, then you will be his disciples, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. He explained that everyone who sins is a slave to sin and that they need God's Son to set them free. This especially offended them. They claimed that Abraham was their father. They claimed God was their Father. They claim that they have never been enslaved to anything. But if they were truly children of Abraham, then they would do what Abraham did. They would believe God's promise of Abraham's Descendant who would save the world from sin. If they were truly God's children, then they would believe in his Son whom he sent to be their Savior.

But you can't see Christ as your Savior if you don't see your need for salvation. If you don't recognize how sin has shackled you and that you are dead without God's Son setting you free, then you will never know God as your Father. They are blinded by their unbelief, and Jesus calls them out for it. He doesn't beat around the bush. He tells them exactly what is in their hearts. They want to kill him. They are lying about him. They are therefore not God's children. They are children of the devil. This is how severe sin is. This is how wicked unbelief is. It is calling God a liar. It is calling God evil.

The reason people are so troubled by our Lord's obedience, suffering, and atoning death is because they don't believe his Word. They have no faith. All they can see is death when they consider Christ giving himself as a sacrifice for our sins. But if you hold onto Jesus' Word, listen to it, rely on it, and commend all your cares to it, then you won't see death. You will see life. You will see in his suffering and dying the very love of God to set his anger aside. You will see his power to save you from eternal death and condemnation. You will sing those great words from the hymn, "Thy grace alone, dear Lord, I plead. Thy death is now my life indeed. For Thou hast paid my ransom."

That Jesus was obedient in suffering and death is a stumbling block to those who don't want to admit the true darkness of their sin. It's foolishness to those who think they understand better than God what is morally good and right. They boldly declare that God would never condemn anyone to hell. God would never make me go through something I don't want to go through. They make themselves the authority on what is good, true, righteous, and compassionate. So instead of fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things, the unbelieving heart of man fears, loves, and trusts in himself.

This affects the way people look at the Fourth Commandment, "Honor your father and your mother." Parents either neglect their children, spoil them, abuse them, or teach them to be twice as selfish as themselves. Maybe they think that their children can do no wrong. Or maybe they treat them as if they can do nothing right. Or they might have a good relationship with their children, and their children grow to respect them. But they don't teach their children to fear and trust in God the Father and their Lord Jesus Christ. They might teach their children to work hard and pursue their goals, but they lead them to think that their own dreams, their own imaginations, and their own ambitions are more important than God's words and promises.

But those who hold onto the words of Jesus trust in him who honored his Father all the way to death. They therefore leave their children something much greater than the things this world can offer. They teach their children the love God has for his Son. And they find this love in the Father giving his Son up into death for us all. It's impossible for our own reason and strength to see this as love. But when we recognize how sick our sin is, then we begin to see how deep God's love is to save us from sin. The Son's willingness to bear that on himself gives us peace, which surpasses all understanding. It is a love that surpasses all human knowledge.

Those fathers and mothers who know this love of God can teach their children to believe. They teach them to trust God even when they must suffer. They learn how to respond to attacks and insults. They don't learn this from the prideful influencers of this world, but from God's own Son. When he is insulted, he doesn't respond to the insult. No, he keeps the issue on topic. He's there to teach about his Father and what his Father sent him to do. If they insult him personally, then he turns the other cheek and lets it go. He doesn't need to defend himself, because he knows that, even after they kill him, his Father will raise him up again. But when they attack his teaching, then he responds, because he is defending the Word his Father gave him to fulfill. They call him a Samaritan, but this is just a personal slur against him. So it doesn't faze him. But when they say he has a demon, he responds, because here they are attacking his teaching. Christian fathers and mothers teach their children not to respond to insults. You can put up with mean comments. Let them go. But don't back down from the truth.

The argument finally hit its climax when Jesus said that Abraham rejoiced to see his day. Abraham believed God's promise of the coming Savior, and God made him the father of many nations who would believe in that same Savior. He rejoiced to see the day of Jesus. But those who didn't believe in Jesus challenged him on this. Abraham is dead, they say. But Jesus says, "Before Abraham ever was, I AM." Here Jesus refers to himself as the Lord who promised salvation to Abraham. He is also claiming to be that salvation promised to Abraham. At this, they picked up stones to throw at Jesus, because he was clearly calling himself God. They were angry with Jesus. But again, it wasn't because they had a good understanding of who God truly is. No, they were offended, because they didn't want to admit they were sinners accountable to God. They don't know God. They don't know his love. Jesus therefore departed from the temple, leaving them only with their own sin and pride. They couldn't rejoice in what Abraham saw. They couldn't take refuge in what their fathers trusted. They couldn't see life. They could only see death.

But you who cling to the words of Jesus will never see death. You'll taste it. Your children will taste it. The sorrows of this earthly life will often overwhelm you. Your sins will at times deceive you. But as you cling to the words of Christ who died for you and freed you from the slavery of sin, you will see life. You will behold the love the Father has for his Son. So don't be afraid to live under his fatherly discipline. Cast your cares upon him, because just as he glorified his Son, he will honor you at the right time. Amen.